The Fourth Church Pulpit

TO BE A HERO

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 8:34-36, Romans 12:1-8

"... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ..." Romans 12:1 (NRSV)

Where have all the heroes gone ... the ones who willingly sacrifice for some greater good? Where are the ones who lay down life for a friend, a child, a beloved, a cause? Is it true, as some are suggesting, that we have become jaded, cynical, that deep in the heart of this culture we no longer value sacrifice and honor the hero?

Is it true, as some are suggesting that the very notion of heroic sacrifice is an anachronism, an awkward remnant of our lost naivete and innocence?

Or, do we lament the absence of heroes because it is important to us; that the humanness of all of us is enhanced by the heroic; and that there is something in each one of us that desperately wants, and needs in some way, to be a hero?

Across the Christian world, particularly in this country, churches are beginning a seasonal ritual as predictable as Advent ... the annual Stewardship Campaign ... the time when pastors and leaders urge the faithful to dig a little deeper and if not sacrifice, at least ratchet up their contributions a few dollars per week to meet the pressure of the local cost-of-living index. You know the litany by now.

> "The church needs you and your money. It costs money to do what we want to do. It will cost more next year than it did this year. And we'd like to do a few additional things – repair the roof, fix the boiler, feed a few more hungry people ... So, it would be wonderful if you would increase it a bit."

Somehow it all works. Church people respond generously; budgets are met and, if not, they are cut and so it goes, year after year. But there are big issues just beneath the surface: issues which can be blurred by focusing on details of budget building and increasing pledges by $8^1/_2$ per cent. There is this matter of sacrifice and voluntarily giving life away ... this matter of being a hero.

Robert Wuthnow is a sociologist at Princeton University who does scholarly research into how Americans establish their values and then live out of them. He is particularly interested in the ways organized religion effects or does not effect that process.

His most recent book, *God and Mammon in America,* looks into and addresses the matter of how our use of material resources reflects our spirituality. The opening paragraph got my attention. I thought it was written for me and most of the people I know:

> "Most of us are working ourselves to death. At least we feel that way as we rush to our next appointment. We are consumed by our jobs, working longer hours than ever before, struggling to stay employed and to get the next promotion. Cellular phones and E-mail make it harder for us to escape. We search restlessly for the meaning of life in what we accomplish. Most of us are also caught up in a spiral of materialism and consumer spending. We want more money so we can buy more things. We may deny that our happiness depends on these purchases, but the more we have, the more we seem to want." [p. 1]

A similar note is sounded by Douglas John Hall, a theologian, who also thinks a lot about how the way we employ our resources — intellectual, physical, spiritual, and financial — reflects our deepest commitments ... It was Hall, I believe, who first said that if you want to learn what a man or woman believes, don't listen to what he or she says in church, ask to see his/her check stubs. In his most recent work called, *Professing the Faith*, part of a three-volume systematic theology, Hall writes,

> "There is almost palpable discontent among us, and it is often most conspicuous" among people of material security and personal freedom. [p. 25]

That's you and me they're talking about, by the way, the ones who are working ourselves to death, the ones who are supposed to be free because we have so much. But – there is "almost palpable discontent among us."

Wuthnow thinks it has cultural and national as well as personal implications.

> "As a nation we are facing serious questions. How much longer can we continue at this pace? Can we force ourselves to work even harder? Can we cut back our material desires and still be happy?" [p. 1]

So far so good: your standard stewardship sermon. The preacher tells us how bad we feel and even if we didn't feel bad when we came in, we will by the time he's done; setting us up for the prescription. "Give more money and you'll feel much better." And he brings two friendly witnesses to the stand: a professor of sociology and a professor of theology who, in addition to living in the privileged and secure environment of academia, probably have in common an innocence of financial facts of life, budgets and bottom lines, and the reality of life in the dog-eat-dog, produce-or-else, world of business.

If I were you and had heard this pitch five or ten times, I'd be turning my attention and imagination elsewhere – to Soldier Field or lunch, or better yet, Soldier Field and lunch. Before you do that, walk out intellectually, if not physically, please allow me to bring to the table two more voices.

The first belongs to Stephen R. Covey, an organizational development consultant who owns his own company and teaches management at B.Y.U., who has written a popular bestseller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey makes money consulting with and advising and writing books for and lecturing to business people. He thinks he knows why and how some of them succeed. And so I was interested to find the business person sounding like the sociologist and theologian. Covey writes:

> "It's incredibly easy to get caught up in an activity trap, in the busy-ness of life, to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover that it's leaning against the wrong wall." [p. 98]

Highly effective people, Covey observes, love a lot and give away a lot of themselves – their money and time and talents. Highly successful people

> "make love a verb. Love is something you do, the sacrifices you make, the giving of self, like a mother bringing a newborn into the world. If you want to study love, study those who sacrifice for others." [p. 80]

He actually said it – the "S" word. You might expect it from the theologian and preacher, but the businessman? "Love is – the sacrifices you make."

"Brothers and Sisters: present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God." The man who wrote that was captivated by the notion that you become all you can be, in an ultimate sense, when you lay down your life. His name was Saul of Tarsus. He changed his name to Paul. He was a tent-maker, a businessman, a skilled promoter, an energetic entrepreneur, a Jewish scholar on the side. And he had been utterly captivated by the life and example of another J Jesus of Nazareth, who Paul became convinced was the very son of God – and his example of dying for the sake of love. Paul couldn't get his mind off it. Christ crucified – Jesus Christ, voluntarily dying for the sake of others, for love, for life, for God.

So Paul started to do it, to live like that, to give it all away, to pour out his life for his Lord Jesus. Once he started to live like that the end wasn't long in coming. He ran afoul of the Roman law and religious custom enough that he was arrested and sent, finally, to Rome itself for final adjudication of his case. It was in preparation for his trip to Rome – as a prisoner – that he wrote a remarkable letter to the Christian Church in the capital city. We know it as the Letter to the Romans. It's the only time we know of that he sat down and thought it out, all the way through. It is, in this sense, our first systematic theology.

For more than half the letter, Paul gives the Roman Christians his ideas of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is. Over and over he tells them it is about God's love in Jesus Christ, grace, and not the law. Christianity is not a way to earn your way into heaven by doing good deeds, obeying the religious law, performing religious rituals. It is a matter of receiving a gift which has already been given, the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and living in joyful, grateful and obedient response.

And then, two-thirds of the way through the letter comes a major shift. The tent-maker, promoter, preacher is coming to Rome in chains. He's in chains because of his loyalty to a dead Jew the empire summarily executed a few year before. His prospects aren't very good. You can see the dark, damp dungeon where he was kept for two years and the place where tradition says he, like his Lord, was executed by the empire.

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters," he wrote to a very vulnerable community of believers in the capital city of an empire which was becoming progressively more hostile to them. "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to present y bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

It was a staggering thing to say to them – those people who were worried about survival. And to us, still worried about our survival, it is equally staggering. It is an outrageous proposal in a culture which has thoroughly convinced itself that the purpose of life ought to be the avoidance of sacrifice, the elimination of the need to sacrifice, the securing of oneself from the opportunity or necessity to sacrifice.

Tom Long, who teaches at Princeton Seminary, has written a wonderful essay on the topic everyone writes about – the numerical decline of the mainline Protestant Church. Long suggests that we have defaulted by forgetting the centrality of the idea of sacrifice. We've done it for what we assumed were good reasons. Who, after all, is interested in an organization that demands sacrifice of its members? Successful organizations, we know, provide something people need: self-esteem, help in getting ahead, reassurance – not sacrifice.

Long and others are asking us to reconsider that consumer model of religion. Maybe we're losing people not because we're asking too much; maybe we're losing because we're not asking enough. And then he digs in – in a way that made me squirm a little. We've convinced ourselves that while our young people, from adolescence through twenty-something, walk out the door, the best and only thing we can do is wait patiently for them to become thirty, have babies and then walk through the door and volunteer to teach Sunday School. But it is just at that period, 12-30, that consumer culture is unleashing an unrelenting bombardment of messages, skillfully created to convince every American young person that the chief end of life on this planet is to buy and own and consume: to conform to culture images of success, security, sexiness ... Rolex, Armani, Lexus ...

At the moment of our thunderous silence, when we are serving up slices of pizza and creating programs to help people decide who they really are, the culture is telling them who they are ... consumers ... and suggesting that there is no such thing as altruism, noble sacrifice, honest devotion ...

One of the new and more successful television experiments is MTV's cartoon featuring two obnoxious adolescent boys – who represent someone said said, "everything that can go wrong with adolescents." Beavis and Butt Head make animal noises, tell smutty jokes. ...

The real problem with the two of them, Tom Long suggests, is that they constantly attack the heroic.

> "Whenever anyone stands out, takes a risk, ventures off the beaten path to offer a gesture of wisdom or generosity, or even dress outside the code, the verdict is quickly pronounced and they are dismissed with a vulgar epithet." [Thomas Long, p. 203, *Theology Today*, July, 1994, "Beavis and Butt Head Get Saved."]

The lead article in the *New York Times* editorial section this morning described a similar cynicism in the media about all public and political figures. Healthy skepticism has become unhealthy and mean cynicism so that no gesture is untainted, no word honest, no program simply what it claims to be. Everything has a spin – a pitch. And the result is a deep cultural cynicism. At the heart of the Christian faith and life is a call to heroism. It is a message that sounds strangely out of place. It is a gospel that is the opposite of the world's values and agenda. "Present yourself as a sacrifice to God." And it is directed to your heart and mind, to the place deep inside where we live and have our being, where we keep our dreams and aspirations and hopes, where we want to become all we can become and all God wants us to be.

At its best the church of Jesus Christ has remembered that and expressed it in its corporate life but mostly in the individual lives of its people: ordinary men and women who, in following Jesus Christ, became heroes.

Do you know the story of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Roman Catholic priest? When the Nazis conquered and occupied Poland, the strategy was to decimate Polish culture and render the Polish people helpless so they could be used as slave labor. The strategy was to eliminate the leaders of the culture: politicians, professors, artists, clergy ... There were thousands of arrests and executions.

Father Kolbe was sent to Auschwitz. One day a prisoner escaped. The response was always the same: 10 or 20 or 30 other prisoners would die in retribution.

The entire camp was summoned to stand before the commandant. They stood for hours, all day long in the hot sun. Finally, 10 prisoners were selected to die. One of them began to weep: "What will my wife and children do?" Maximilian Kolbe stepped out of line, addressed the commandant, and volunteered to take the man's place, to sacrifice his life so that another could live.

His request was granted and he was marched to the starvation bunker, where prisoners were placed and then ignored while they died slowly and terribly of thirst ...

Other prisoners later recalled that from the starvation bunker, while Father Kolbe and the nine others died, came not the usual screams and curses but the soft melodies of Polish hymns. [See William Bennett, *The Book of Virtue*, p.]

At its best the Christian Church has not forgotten about heroic sacrifice. Mostly it is not as dramatic as that.

Let me tell you about two heroes I met this summer. I was asked to lead a seminar at our Presbyterian Adult Education Center at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico. The topic was "The Future of the Presbyterian Church." There were twenty-five participants: ministers, lay people, old and young. As you might expect the conversation finally came to sex, human sexuality and the church, gender issues, sexual orientation issues, sexuality and the single life. It was fairly predictable until Dorothy Callerod decided to speak. Dorothy is eighty-five, a retired national missionary who worked in Appalachian schools and on Native American reservations and settlement houses. On the topic of sexuality, she was careful to offer her disclaimers. She wasn't proposing her life style for anyone else. Times have changed: things are very different, what we used to think really wasn't very healthy, etc. But, when we got to a topic over which people disagree strongly, and I suggested that each person in the group might want to offer an opinion or a conviction or an experience, Dorothy told her story. She told how she had attended a youth missionary conference

as a young girl and had made a decision to give her life to Christ – to what we used to call "full-time Christian service." We didn't ordain women back then. The only real option was missionary work – teaching, social work, nursing. It was not an environmental conducive, or even friendly, to any relationship between the sexes. And so, in order to serve, Dorothy lived a life of voluntary celibacy. With a twinkle in her eye, she said it hadn't been easy, there lots of times when she was lonely and did not wish to be celibate. Again she assured us that she wasn't proposing a model for anyone else – and she was very happy with the new openness in our culture about sexuality. But she thought we might like to know how she decided to give her life to Jesus. It was stunning.

And then I met my old friends Art and Helen Romig. They're in their mid-eighties. Art was born in China, son of Presbyterian missionaries. He returned to the U.S.A. for college, met a beautiful young social worker from New York City, married her and they returned to the South of China. I had the privilege of working with him and we became friends. I encouraged him to tell his stories, and write them down and now he's on a roll. He's written a two-volume memoir. We went to church with them this summer and during worship Art reached in his suit coat pocket and pulled out twenty more pages.

As young missionaries in their 20s, Art and Helen were stationed in a remote province with no means of transportation in or out except cart, horseback, donkey. Helen became pregnant. There were no doctors and so at seven months they journeyed for seven days, Art walking, Helen riding on a donkey, across mountains and valleys, staying in Chinese road houses filled with opium smokers, bandits ... They made it. Betty Ann was born in Yunnanfu.

They are heroes too: Art, Helen and Dorothy ... ordinary men and women who gave their lives to Jesus.

Who are your heroes? Who gave themselves so you could live? Whose life do you bear within you because they gave it? Your mother – your father – teacher – grandparent – friend? Whose example inspires you and lifts your heart ... and invites you to become more than you are?

The philosopher Ernest Becker says that while the word "heroic" makes us blush and seems too big, too romantic, triumphalistic – the truth is that

> "to strive to be a hero, to have one's life rise above the mediocre, really to count for something extraordinary, to outshine death, to be capable of the highest generosity, to self sacrifice, is what we most deeply need and want." [See Tom Long in *Theology Today*, July, 1994]

The sociologist, theologian and businessman are right, I believe. There is something wrong. Deep inside we want to be a hero, not for selfish reasons. We want to give our lives to something big and important and lasting. We need something important enough to consider presenting our lives as a sacrifice and offering to God.

That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is: the good news of God's love, revealed and lived by a man who died, offered up his life, for youand me.

And it is an invitation to respond to that love by following, imitating, loving without counting the cost, giving yourself away.

That's what stewardship is: the money you contribute, of course, but beyond that and beneath that – to be a hero.

Amen.